

September 16, 2008 - 6:48PM
Updated: September 16, 2008 - 7:35PM

State wants more trauma centers in hospitals

Howard Fischer, Capitol Media Services

State health officials are working to get rural hospitals throughout Arizona to upgrade their emergency rooms to trauma centers. The main argument is that it will save lives.

But Will Humble, deputy director of public health services of the state Department of Health Services, said Tuesday he believes he has an even better argument: He says hospitals can make more money.

The move comes as the agency tries to figure out how to make a higher level of emergency care available in more places.

The only Level 1 trauma centers are in the Phoenix, Tucson and Flagstaff areas. These are the facilities certified to be able to handle the most severe of accidents.

Humble said there is no way most rural hospitals could achieve that status, given the cost of the equipment and staffing required.

Humble noted that there are lower levels of certification, though no Arizona hospital has achieved that. But he said there is no reason to believe that most facilities could not get to be at least Level 4 trauma centers, the lowest level.

"The real nuts-and-bolts benefit of becoming Level 4 is you become efficient at resuscitating and stabilizing patients" he said.

"So the patients come into your facility in critical condition," Humble said. "You're able to stabilize them so they can be transferred, usually by ground ambulance, and arrive at a Level 1 trauma center in stable condition rather than critical condition."

The plan has the backing of Gov. Janet Napolitano.

In her order directing health officials to create more trauma centers, the governor said 60 percent of traumatic injuries occur in rural areas, with injury being the leading cause of death of Arizonans younger than 44.

And Humble said there is data to show that reaching a trauma center in the first hour after injury markedly increases the chances of survival.

Humble said state law does not give his agency the power to order hospitals to upgrade their emergency room facilities to trauma centers.

He said that's why health department staffers have been going around the state in hopes of selling it as a way to make more profits.

Humble noted that hospitals can charge more - and insurance companies will pay more - for services in a trauma center than in a regular emergency room.

While finances may convince hospitals to upgrade their services, Humble said the beneficiaries remain accident victims.

Ultimately, Humble said the state should have a full range of trauma centers, including those at Levels 2 and 3.

He said a study by the American College of Surgeons concluded that having a full range of trauma centers throughout the state would save between 300 and 400 lives a year.

He said, though, that those higher levels require more of a financial commitment than many rural hospitals probably can make, especially without the possibility of recouping those costs with higher billings.